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MEMOIR
OF
COL. ALEXANDER BIDDLE.

BY
HENRY CAREY BAIRD.





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(Read before the American Philosophical Society, October 20, 1899.)

In compliance with the resolution of the Society, adopted May 19, 1899, and with the appointment of the President, I have the honor to submit the following memorial of the late Col. Alexander Biddle :

In vain may we search the annals of the United States, from the Colonial period to the present hour, to find a military and naval family record showing such constant, such persistent devotion and gallantry as that of Biddle ; and that the record will justify this assertion there is not the shadow of a doubt.

In the War with France, 1755-1763, the family is represented by Capt. Edward Biddle, and in the Revolution by his brothers, Commodore Nicholas Biddle, of the U. S. S. "Randolph," and Charles Biddle, and their cousin, Col. Clement Biddle ; in the war with Tripoli, and those with England, 1812, and Mexico, 1846-1848, by Commodore James Biddle, and still again in the war of 1812 by Commodore Biddle's brothers, Majors Thomas Biddle and John Biddle, as well as by Col. Clement C. Biddle, their cousin ; in the Florida and Mexican Wars, by Lieut. James S. Biddle, U. S. N., and in the latter war by Major Charles J. Biddle, who was also colonel of the "Bucktail" Regiment, Pennsylvania Reserves, in the War of the Rebellion, and in this last-named war by the present Brigadier Gen. James Biddle, U. S. A., by Col. Chapman Biddle, Col. Alexander Biddle, Major Henry J.

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Biddle, Hon. Craig Biddle, A.D.C., Col. James C. Biddle, and his brother, Caldwell K. Biddle; in the war with Nez Perces, 1877, by Lieut. Jonathan W. Biddle, 7th Cavalry, U. S. A., and in the war with Spain by Maj. William Phillips Biddle, U. S. Marine Corps, Admiral Dewey's Chief of Staff, at Manila, and his brother, Dr. Clement Biddle, Surgeon U. S. N., of U. S. S. "Texas;" Alexander Mercer Biddle, First Troop, Philadelphia City Cavalry, and Col. John Biddle Porter, grandson of Major John Biddle, U. S. Army of the War of 1812.

George Cadwalader, a grandson of Col. Clement Biddle, of the Revolution, was a brigadier general U. S. army, March 3, 1847, and commanded a brigade in Gen. Scott's army in the War with Mexico. He was distinguished in the battle of El Molino del Rey, and received the brevet of major-general "for gallant and meritorious conduct in the battle of Chapultepec," September 13, 1847. He served in the war of 1861-1865, as major-general of volunteers. Lieut.-Col. Charles E. Cadwalader, captain 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry, and aide-de-camp to Gen. Meade, war of 1861-1865, is a great-grandson of Col. Clement Biddle.

On the breaking out of the Revolution, this family spirit proved too strong for the Quakerism of Owen Biddle (born, 1738; died, 1799), a brother of Col. Clement Biddle, and great-uncle of Alexander Biddle. For a season parting company with his non-resisting principles, he was a delegate to the Provincial Conference, January 23, 1775; member of the Committee of Safety, June, 1775, to July, 1776, and of the Council of Safety, July, 1776, to March, 1777; member of the Board of War, March, 1777; of the Constitutional Convention, July, 1776; and June, 1777, Deputy Commissary of Forage. With Robert Morris, he became personally bound for various sums of over two hundred and sixty thousand pounds sterling for provisions for the army. During the occupancy of Philadelphia by the British, the enemy destroyed his residence. "Peel Hall," on the present site of Girard College grounds.

When, however, the pressure of danger was removed, and independence was achieved, "the convictions of conscience wrought upon him, and he addressed his monthly meeting," humbly acknowledging the error of his ways, and asking to be restored to membership, his "sincere and fervent desire," and Quakerism, his beautiful faith and practice, once more became the ruling spirit of his life. Speaking at Westtown in June last, Isaac Sharpless, president of Haverford College, said: "If you would find among the various deliverances of the day the highest expression of the purposes and spirit of the school (Westtown) by which to honor the past and guide the future, you will find it incarnate in Owen Biddle."

Of the foregoing, three, Commodore Nicholas Biddle and Major Henry J., and his son, Lieut. Jonathan Williams Biddle, were either killed or mortally wounded in battle. The first-named died under circumstances of sublime heroism. In 1778, in command of the U. S. frigate "Randolph," 32, in order to enable his consort, the "General Moultrie," to escape, he engaged the British ship "Yarmouth," 64. Wounded early in the action, a chair was brought on deck, and therein seated, while his wound was being dressed, he fought his ship until she blew up, not, however, before he had inflicted severe damage on his antagonist.

Of this blood and lineage was Alexander Biddle. Small wonder, then, that when his country called her sons to arms, that he should respond and serve her well. He was born in Philadelphia, April 29, 1819, and died at Chestnut Hill, May 2, 1899. He was one of the sons of Thomas Biddle, the eminent banker, and grandson of Col. Clement Biddle, deputy quartermaster-general in the Army of the Revolution, who took part in the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Germantown and Monmouth, and was commissary-general at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-1778. On his mother's side, Alexander Biddle was a grandson of Gen. Jonathan Williams, colonel of engineers, U. S. army, a kinsman of Dr. Franklin. Alexander Biddle was sixth in descent from William Biddle, who came from London to

America, in 1681; was one of the proprietors of West Jersey, owning nearly 43,000 acres of land, a magistrate and one of the members of its Council. In 1703 he was one of the representatives of the Western Division of New Jersey in the Assembly. He died at his seat, "Mount Hope," on the Delaware, above Burlington, 1712. Through his ancestor, Owen Owen (born at Merion, Philadelphia, Pa., now Montgomery county, 21st of twelfth month, 1690; died Philadelphia, 5th of eighth month, 1741), Alexander Biddle could trace his descent from Trahairn Goch ap Madoc of Llyn in Caernarvonshire, Wales, who died about eighteenth year of reign of Edward II (1325), and who was himself descended from the princes of South Wales.*

One of the first schools to which Alexander Biddle went was that of Sears C. Walker, in Sansom street, below Eighth, about 1830-1832, when he was between eleven and thirteen years of age, and among his school-fellows was Mr. Ellis Yarnall. Walker was a man of fine abilities, full of knowledge, and Mr. Yarnall states that he delighted in imparting to the boys, in a conversational way, much interesting and useful knowledge, not immediately in the line of their regular studies; thus adding a charm to their school lives, an experience seldom met with by any boy in this dull and painful period of his existence. Dr. Gross, who knew him intimately, in his *Autobiography*, speaks of him as "one of the brightest intellects of the age, an ardent devotee of science, and a great mathematician and astronomer." Walker was elected a member of this Society, October 20, 1837, and contributed to its *Transactions* and *Proceedings* a number of learned papers, principally upon astronomical subjects. He died January 30, 1853. The influence of such a teacher on a clever boy must remain for good throughout that boy's life.

The subject of this memoir was graduated at the University of Pennsylvania in 1838, shortly after which he entered the counting-house of Bevan & Humphreys, where he

* Glenn, *Merion in the Welsh Tract*, pp. 112-150.

remained until 1842. In the last-named year he went as super-cargo to Manila, Sydney and China, returning, after eighteen months' absence, in 1844. In 1848 he became a member of the banking firm of Thomas Biddle & Co., where he remained until after his return from the war in 1864.

In the War of the Rebellion, Alexander Biddle entered the service September 1, 1862, as major of the 121st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, the colonel of the regiment being his cousin, Chapman Biddle. This regiment, raised principally in Philadelphia and Venango counties, was organized under Major Biddle, in camp near Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, ordered to Washington, September 5, and went into camp at Camp Chase, Arlington, on the following day. It was systematically drilled, but not immediately armed. On October 1 it moved to Frederick, Md., and a week later joined the 3d Division, First Army Corps, under command of Gen. Meade, near Sharpsburg, Md.

On December 13 it took part in that brilliant, well-delivered and well-sustained attack of Gen. Meade, from the left of the Union lines, in the battle of Fredericksburg, which only needed proper support by those higher in command to have turned that disastrous defeat into a decisive victory. After the war Gen. Lee conceded to Gen. Meade that if the latter had held his position, and that at one time he believed he would have done so, the former would have retreated. Of the part taken by the 121st Regiment in this battle, Col. Alexander Biddle, in his *Narrative*, says: "Its first general action was at Fredericksburg, where, in the assault of Meade's Division upon the enemy's lines, it lost one-fifth of its force, and was congratulated for its behavior both by Meade and Reynolds." The late Walter L. C. Biddle, son of Col. Chapman Biddle, in his address at the dedication of the monument to the 121st on the battlefield of Gettysburg, said :

"When you stormed the heights of Fredericksburg, leaving your dead piled up to mark the post of honor that you held, your deeds were known and voiced by Meade himself,

who cried, ' Well done, 121st; good enough for one day !' Of the conduct of Major Biddle on that memorable occasion we have the official evidence of his colonel, who in his report says: ' I may mention that the order of the regiment was in a great measure due to the coolness and efficiency of Lieut.-Col. Davis and Major Biddle.' "

On the first day at Gettysburg, July 1, 1863, the 121st Regiment, under command of Major Biddle, constituted a part of the left wing of the Army of the Potomac, under Gen. Reynolds. A part of that wing, consisting of the First and Eleventh Corps, bore the brunt of the rebel attack on that day of disaster, before the army had been concentrated. The 121st Regiment, being on the extreme left of the Union line, was outflanked and the position was turned, and it was finally forced to retreat. " The constant changes of position which the regiment was ordered to make," says Major Biddle in his official report, " and the seeming uncertainty of which way we were to expect an attack, or what position we were to defend, was exceedingly trying to the discipline of the regiment," but, as he adds, " its conduct was, in my opinion, far beyond praise." In an interesting narrative of the experiences of the regiment, Col. Biddle says, in reference to the results of its experiences on that day: " The inequality of the combat was soon manifest. Overwhelmed with the fire from flank and front, this small force, of less than three full companies, retained the position until the battery had safely retired, and nothing but a barren field was left to their opponents." He mentions that at the end of the day, " out of 256 who marched to Gettysburg that morning," but eighty-two men remained with the colors, fit for duty; Capt. William Dorr being the only line officer unhurt. The regiment fell back to Cemetery Hill, and as a result of the day's work, he expresses the opinion that " the strategical position, whatever the quality of his troops, can hardly be considered in favor of Lee."

That night the regiment slept on its arms on the south slope of Cemetery Hill, where the enemy's shells from both

front and rear met in the attacks of the second day. On the morning of the 3d, it took up position in rear of the centre, in front of Doubleday's headquarters. In the front, from Cemetery Hill to Round Top, the Union line was thin and weak, and upon this, after a morning's manœuvres, one hundred pieces of artillery opened fire; the notice and prelude, as Major Biddle says, "of the grand attack of the third day; but this notice lost to Gen. Lee all the advantages he possessed in selecting a point of attack and massing his troops against it," and it was therefore, as Major Biddle considered, a tactical mistake. The Union lines, through the energetic efforts of Gen. Newton, were greatly strengthened, and the attack of the enemy failed, and Gettysburg ended. The actual loss of the 121st Regiment was 12 killed outright, 106 wounded, 61 missing. "At no time," says Col. Biddle, "was there any panic or other characteristic than that of steadiness, alacrity and willingness in behavior," and he adds: "The seven periods in the battle of Inkerman, described by Kinglake, exhibit a resistance of British troops to as many assaults, but not with such loss. No field of battle exhibits qualities which do more honor to the patient endurance, spirit and discipline of the soldier; but yet, as in all other fields," he adds, "so in Gettysburg, it is to be always remembered of those who have acted best their part, that they rest upon the battlefield."

To Major Biddle's "distinguished bravery" on this trying field, Gen. Rowley, chief of the division, in his official report, bears testimony, and Col. Chapman Biddle, in command of the brigade, says: "It gives me pleasure to make mention of the excellent conduct of Major Biddle, commanding 121st Pennsylvania Volunteers."

On July 20, 1863, Major Biddle was promoted lieutenant-colonel of the regiment, and, Chapman Biddle having retired, completely broken in health, he was, December 11, 1863, further advanced to the rank of colonel. The regiment was now reduced to a mere captain's command, but 100 men being present with the colors, fit for duty, while no arrange-

ments were contemplated by the Government for recruiting its ranks. This want of an adequate command, added to urgent family considerations, caused him to send in his resignation, and he was, on January 9, 1864, honorably discharged, after an arduous and creditable career, in which he had displayed conspicuous bravery, and, under most trying circumstances, proved his skill and fitness for command; thus upholding the high character of the family, and adding to its already unique military and naval record. The First Army Corps, depleted in its ranks, was soon after, amid much heartburning and wounded pride, merged into the Fifth Corps, thus, as an organization, passing from the field of action but a few months after its commander, John F. Reynolds, had given his life for his country.

When, in 1864, Col. Biddle had returned from the war, and had retired from the banking firm of Thomas Biddle & Co., he devoted himself, not merely to his own private affairs, but became, to the close of his blameless and useful life, a citizen of intense public spirit, filling with great conscientiousness the many positions of trust to which he had been called.

From 1858 to 1870 he was a director of the Library Co. of Philadelphia; from 1861 to 1899 a director in the Pennsylvania Company for Insurance on Lives, etc.; from 1864 to 1899 a director of The Philadelphia Contributionship, the oldest insurance company in Philadelphia, and for twelve years chairman of the Board; from 1868 to 1899 a manager of the Pennsylvania Hospital; from 1869 to 1884, when he resigned on account of ill health, a member of the Board of City Trusts, and again from 1888 to 1899, having from 1881 to 1884 been the President of the Board; from 1884 to 1899 a director of the American Insurance Co.

In addition to the above, he was for years a director of the Lehigh Coal & Navigation Co., of the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society and of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company.

The welfare of the Pennsylvania Hospital and Girard College absorbed much of his thought, interest and time, and

he was ever on the alert to see what new measures could be devised to make these great institutions more efficient in their good work. The Hospital he served "with rare fidelity and judgment." For more than twenty-five years he compiled the Annual Report, and his purse was ever open to respond to the needs of this great charity. To a friend he once stated that of all the Boards of which he was a member, the one to which he gave the greatest attention was the Board of City Trusts, on account of Girard College and the education, moral, physical and intellectual, of the boys, and he was continually seeking suggestions to that end, in order that these boys might be turned out good citizens, fully equipped for the battle of life. One of his reasons for giving the boys a military organization was, "Pennsylvania will then have a good supply of orderly sergeants." How characteristic, how far-seeing and thoughtful, the orderly sergeant being the soul of the company; or, according to the Prussian view, "the mother of the company."

Col. Biddle was preëminently amiable, modest and well balanced, and of deep religious convictions. He was a keen sportsman, a thoroughly trained athlete, and an intelligent and discriminating student of military history, and from 1849 to 1856 an active member of the City Troop, and had thus fitted himself for command when he found himself face to face with war. He was so bold and graceful a horseman as to elicit the admiration of the soldiers on the field; and even at the age of 75 he could clear a four-rail fence, keeping perfectly his seat in the saddle. His modesty was such that he contended that he had never fought a battle, but that the battles were fought by the men.

On February 17, 1888, he was elected a member of this Society, a membership which was most appropriate and in the possession of which he felt much honored, his kinsman, Owen Biddle (1738-1799), already mentioned, having been one of its most eminent members.

In 1855 he married Julia Wilmer, daughter of Samuel Rush. Her death occurred but a few months before his own,

and from the effects of it, although in silence he bore his sorrow, he never wholly recovered. Four sons and one daughter survive them.

The eloquent words which were used to characterize a brilliant colonel of the Revolution may, with entire appropriateness, be applied to Alexander Biddle :

“ Modest without timidity, generous without extravagance, brave without rashness, and disinterested without austerity, which imparted firmness to his conduct, mildness to his manners, and solidity to his judgment, which armed him with an equanimity unalterable by the frowns of adversity or the smiles of fortune, and steadiness of soul not to be subdued by the disasters of defeat or elated by the triumphs of victory.”



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